

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Washington D.C. - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) welcomes recent steps by the government of Bangladesh to establish an official commission to investigate the violence that followed parliamentary elections in October 2001. The announcement came after a High Court order to establish such a commission. Following the October 2001 elections, there were numerous reports of killings, rape, illegal land-seizures, arson, extortion, and intimidation of members of religious minority communities, particularly Hindus.

USCIRF commends both the government and the High Court for taking this long-overdue action, suggested by commissioners in USCIRF's first public hearing on Bangladesh, held in New York in April 2004 ([transcript available here](#)), and called for repeatedly by USCIRF since then.

"USCIRF urges that this investigation be conducted in a fair, thorough, and timely manner; that its findings be made public; and that perpetrators of crimes uncovered by the investigation be prosecuted to the full extent of the law," said USCIRF chair, Leonard Leo. "Perpetrators of violence targeting individuals because of their perceived religious beliefs or affiliation should not be afforded impunity."

In large part because of the anti-minority violence that followed the October 2001 parliamentary elections and the authorities' subsequent failure to investigate and hold perpetrators to account, USCIRF had, from 2005 until May 2009, placed Bangladesh on its Watch List of countries which require close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by their governments. USCIRF removed Bangladesh from its Watch List following elections in December 2008 in which members of religious minority communities were able to exercise their voting rights freely and peacefully.

"Although Bangladesh is no longer on USCIRF's Watch List, USCIRF continues to urge progress on a range of religious freedom issues in order to bring Bangladesh into compliance with international human rights standards," added Mr. Leo.

Needed measures include government action to institute judicial and police reforms to ensure the fair treatment of all minorities; to rescind the ban, instituted by a previous government, on publications of the Ahmadi religious community; to uphold existing agreements to respect the rights of religious and ethnic minority communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region; and to restore to rightful owners property seized from Hindus under discriminatory legislation such as the Vested Property Act. Draft legislation regarding the last mentioned issue is reportedly now under consideration. USCIRF urges that the government of Bangladesh consult legal scholars

with recognized expertise on this issue and representatives of the affected communities in order to devise effective remedies for past abuses and to prevent further property seizures based on the owners' religious affiliation.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.